POE'S CONCEPTION OF IMMORTALITY

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神の存在，霊魂不滅等の問題をめぐって，Poe の心には冷徹な理性の人と，高度の宗教心を持つ感情の人との分裂，相剋があった。前者は単なる理性によって神の存在証明を企図したが，その失敗は彼から信仰を奪いさり，「不可解な悲哀」の深淵へと彼を投げいれた。一方後者は現世の不幸な生活を逃避して，永世を欣求する原動力となった。Poe の作品に何等かの形の霊魂不滅の思想が或は顕在的に或は潜在的に流れているものが多いのは後者のあらわれである。しかし，晩年には同一性の自意識を持つ主体の死後に於ける存続については次第に懐疑的に傾いていったと思はれる。Poe が最後に到達したのは Eureka にあらわれた永世を肯定する一種の汎神論で，これは彼の高い知性と深い宗教心の結合が生みだした嫡嗣であったことは否定できないが，彼がここに真の安心立命の境地を見出し得たか否かは疑問である。

I

IT has often been asserted that Poe lived "out of space, out of time," but this is a deliberate distortion of the fact, if by this phrase it is meant that he lived quite independently of the America of the first half of the 19th century. That he did not wholly stand aloof from the trends and interests of the times is amply evidenced in *Hans Pfaall, The Balloon Hoax, The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade, The Man that was Used Up*, etc. What is more noteworthy in this connection is that in his imaginative writings with Death and Immortality as their theme, which at first sight might give the impression of his escaping into "a phantasmal world which registers a complete divorce from his environment,"[1] he turns out, on closer inspection, to be the child of the age in which science was shaking the foundations of Christian beliefs.

Although nothing definite is known about the kind of religious education Poe received in his earlier years*, one may form some idea of the religious climate in

* It is reported that in his childhood Poe went regularly to church with his foster mother. (The

which Poe grew up from the following accounts. According to Allen Tate, "The educated Virginian was a deist by conviction, and an Anglican or Presbyterian by habit."[2] Another authority on the South says that "there was a time, to be sure — the period of the ascendancy of the Virginians — when what may be called the Anglican spirit, meaning a fairly easy tolerance in religious matters, was, in sharp contrast to England, the prevailing rule in the South. There was even a time when atheism and French deism were pretty common in the older regions and in the back country. In 1819 Mr. Jefferson could set up his university* on a foundation, that, though it was not "godless," as was charged against it, was still remarkable for religious freedom."

In addition to such a background what is not to be forgotten in considering Poe's approach to religious matters was his early belief in reason as "man's chief idiosyncracy."[4] Crude and unaided reason though it was, it was the prop of Poe as a sound logician, as the writer of those "Tales of Ratiocionation," and as the successful challenger to the public in deciphering cryptograms.

Thus both circumstances and his innate nature would seem to have conspired to make a deist of him. In this light it is interesting to read a passage from *The Ms. Found in the Bottle,* a prize story published in 1833, marking his emergence into fame and later bringing him the editorship of *The Southern Literary Messenger.* The hero of the tale, left all alone in the ill-fated ship being driven by a tempest to the South Pole in the blackness of eternal night and a chaos of foamless water, cries, "It is evident that we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge — some never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction."

What Poe wrote eight years later may be quoted in elucidation of the above quotation. At the beginning of *The Colloquy of Monos and Una* the hero says, "born again... These were the words upon whose mystical meaning I had so long pondered, rejecting the explanations of the priesthood, until Death itself resolved for me the secret."[6]**

Complete Poems of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. by J. H. Whitty, p, xxiv, Boston, 1917)

* The University of Virginia to which Poe was admitted in February, 1826, leaving in December of the same year.

** It is my conviction that the similar thought is expressed in *El Dorado,* which some scholars maintain is the account of the gold rush.

Here is the description of a man who refuses to put belief in the revelations of the Bible about death, and yet clings or tries to cling to the belief in a future life in some form or other. The hero of both tales might well be identified with Poe who was torn between the man of reason and the man of feeling which existed in him disjointed.

The same was true of the problem of God closely related with that of Immortality. He felt the existence of God, but intellectual belief in God for which he craved would never come to him. His verdict was, "However well a man may reason on the great topics of God and immortality these are things to be felt rather than demonstrated."[7] The trouble was that to a man of his intellectual cast who put implicit faith in cold reason there was no real satisfaction to be gained from merely feeling the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. What the hero of *Mesmeric Revelation* confesses would seem to have an important bearing on this subject. "I need not tell you," he says, "how skeptical I have hitherto been on the topics of the soul's immortality. I cannot deny that there has always existed, as if in that very soul which I have been denying, a vague half-sentiment of its own existence. But this half-sentiment at no time amounted to conviction. With it my reason had nothing to do. All attempts at logical inquiry resulted, indeed, in leaving me more skeptical than before... I repeat, then, that I only half felt, and never intellectually believed."[8] From the criticism Poe passed on *Charles Ellwood* of Orestes Brownson, in which the author tried to prove God's existence reasoning from cause to effeet, we realize that Poe uses the hero of *Mesmeric Revelation* as his own mouthpiece.

In fact one may safely imagine that Poe, as a man of cold reason, early lost faith in a personal God and the immortality of the soul, which resulted in his unaccountable gloom. In 1832 soon after assuming the editorship of the *Southern Literary Messenger* Poe wrote to J. P. Kennedy, who helped him secure the position, as follows: "The situation is agreeable to me for many reasons — but alas! it appears to me that nothing can now give me pleasure — or the slightest gratification. I am suffering under a depression of spirits such as I have never felt before... I am wretched, and know not why... Convince me that it is worth one's while — that it is at all necessary to live, and you will prove yourself indeed my friend."[9] The gloom

in a similar vein reappears after the lapse of fourteen years in a letter to Annie L. Richmond. After pleading about temporal "misfortunes which never come single," he continues, "No doubt, Annie, you attribute my '*gloom*' to these events — but you could be wrong. It is not in the power of any mere *worldly* considerations, such as these, to depress me... No, my sadness is *unaccountable*..." [10]

Set this beside Carlyle's words uttered at the darkest moments of his gloom, and the similarity in the nature of their melancholy is too obvious. Carlyle's was also a nameless unrest. As with Carlyle the loss of his religious belief was the loss of everything, so it must have been with Poe. In any case here is *the typical gloom* arising from "Angst" of ignorance of what port one sailed from and what port one is bound to; "Angst" of being on the brink of the abyss of Nothing; "Angst" of life as a step towards death which is the end of everything. Thus Poe suffered in good company, which includes such illustrious names as Byron, Shelley, Carlyle, Melville, Kierkegaard, and other existentialists. There is every reason to believe that with the tragic split in him Poe could have turned into a nihilist or an atheist.

II

It was quite characteristic of Poe, whose nature was of mixed kind, that in the same person who had a strong doubt of the immortality of the soul there existed as strong a feeling for its survival. This feeling was responsible for his remark that the skepticism of Lord Bolingbroke rendered his philosophical essays comparatively valueless. It was from the same feeling that he declared, "No man doubts the immortality of the soul." It is to be noted, however, that in the same breath the man of reason popped his head out to plead that, "yet of all truths this truth of immortality is the most difficult to prove by any mere series of syllogisms." [11]

Now this highly religious feeling may have been innate with him, but it is more than probable that the acquired feeling of the ephemeral nature of this world made him long for a future life, everlasting, and free from the worries of the temporal life. In a letter sent to J. R. Lowell in 1839 he opened his heart as follows: "I really perceive that vanity about which men merely prate — the vanity of the human or temporal life. I live continually in a reverie of the future..." Towards the end of the same letter he added, "I have been too deeply conscious of the mutability and

evanescence of temporal things to give any continuous effort to anything — to be consistent in anything. My life has been... a scorn of all things present, in an earnest desire for the future."[12]

What Poe meant by "an earnest desire for the future" might well have been the survival of the soul, but it never amounted to more than a "reverie." This "reverie of the future" took shape in some of his imaginative writings, which were, in the nature of things, tinged with phantasy and lacking in consistency. The central theme, however, remained the immortality of the soul, and love that survives the dissolution of the mortal body. The second element was almost invariably coupled with the first, because spiritual love was dearest to his heart and the fear that death might be the end of this precious possession was more than he could stand. Since all this was a form of wish-fulfilment of an escapist character, it was naturally wanting in that conviction of an after life which characterizes the writings of Novalis represented by *Hymen an die Nacht.*

From the start of his career as a writer, Poe indulged in a reverie of one kind or another. In *Metzengerstein,* his first prose work, Poe describes a metamorphosis in which a human soul incarnates a horse. Never again did he take up this belief in the transmigration of a human soul into the body of the lower animals, but the reincarnation, as taking place through the soul of a dead man animating the body of another human being, was treated over and over in his subsequent writings. Suffice it to say that they include *Morella, Eleonora, Ligeia, A Tale of the Rugged Mountains,* etc. It is obvious that his desire to convince himself of the immortality of the soul was the movivation of all those tales.

Closely connected with the belief in transmigration was the corresponding one in pre-existence. As the Pythagoreans who believed in transmigration were followers of the doctrine of pre-existence, so Poe likewise took up this form as a reverie. As early as 1835 he wrote in *Berenice,* "But it is mere idleness to say that I had not lived before, that the soul has no previous existence. You deny it? Let us not argue the matter. Convinced myself, I seek not to convince."[13] This question again was beyond proof, a matter of reverie, which was to recur as faith in *Eureka.*

Another question relevant to the immortality of the soul is that of individual identity. On this Poe touches in *Morella.* "That identity, which is termed personal,"

the hero of the tale says, "Mr. Locke I think truly defines to consist in the sameness of rational Being. And since by person we understand an intelligent essence having reason, and since there is a consciousness which always accompanies thinking, it is this which makes us all to be that which we call *ourselves*, thereby distinguishing us from other Beings that think, and giving us our personal identity. But the *principium individuationis*, the notion of that identity which *at death is or is not lost forever*, was to me, at all times, a consideration of intense interest." [14]

That Poe at one time seems to have connected the idea of the immortality of the soul with the survival of individual identity is evidenced in the following passage from *The Pit and the Pendulum*, where the state of the hero in the swoon, is described thus, "What of it there remained I will not attempt to define, or even to describe; yet all was not lost. In the deepest slumber — no! In delirium — no! In a swoon — no! In death — no! Even in the grave all *is not* lost. Else there is no immortality for man." [15]

However, in *The Colloquy of Monos and Una*, where the life in the grave is traced step by step right after internment, all is assumed as lost in the end. We read how at the earlier stages, volition, existing as it does, is powerless. The senses are unusually active, assuming often each other's functions at random, but all perceptions are purely sensuous. In time, from the wreck and chaos of the usual senses there arises a sixth sense, while motion in the physical form fully ceases. Then all of what man terms sense is merged in the sole consciousness of entity, and the mortal body is at length stricken with Decay. Yet all of sentience is not lost, for Monos is not unconscious of those movements which displace his dear Una from his side, which confines him within the coffin and leaves him to his sad slumbers with the worms. And in the grave after the lapse of days and weeks and months the soul still takes record of the flight of time without object, and without purpose. After a year the consciousness of *being* grows hourly more indistinct, merging in that of place. And to him in the strict embrace of the *Shadow* there comes the light of enduring Love when Una's coffin descends in the grave. But after that all is void. The sense of Being utterly departs, and there reigns in its stead the autocrats *Place* and *Time*. And the grave is a home for that which is not, for that which has neither thought nor

sentience, for nothingness, yet for immortality. From what Poe says in *The Pit and the Pendulum* that there is no immortality if all is lost in the grave it sounds unreasonable that this complete loss of individual identity should still be called immortality. This apparent contradiction was solved by the assumption that souls are born again to an everlasting life after the lapse of a certain period of time called by Poe "Night" or "stupor." In *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion,* Charmion, explaining things to Eiros who has just entered into an eternal life, says, "Your allotted days of stupor have expired." Charmion himself who "passed into night through the Grave,"[16] recalls how the same thing happend to him ten years earlier.

This notion of the loss of individual identity was dominant in his mind when Poe wrote *The Raven* in 1845. To the hero's question whether he should clasp the maiden whom the angels call Lenore, the Raven's answer is "Nevermore." When one recalls how often he had described the happy reunion of the dead lovers in the other world, one realizes that much water had flowed under the bridge since he wrote *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion, The Colloquy of Monos and Una* and *The Power of Words.*

III

It has already been stated that Poe, as the man of reason, was left dissatisfied with the reasoning current in his day to prove the existence of God and immortality. This was quite natural, for, as William James puts it, "The fact is that these arguments* do but follow the combined suggestions of the facts and our feeling. They prove nothing rigorously."[17] However, in spite of his criticism of and dissatisfaction with these arguments, his deep religiosity pushed him towards pantheism rather than towards atheism.

Before reaching his final goal Poe made several attempts which fructified in *Eureka.* Once on the way, Poe seems to have sought a key to the solution of the great secret in mesmerism, because in that condition, Poe thought, "the reasoning and its conclusion — the cause and its effect -- are present together."[18] *Mesmeric Revelation,* which was published in the *Columbian Magazine* in August, 1844, is, of

* The arguments for the existence of God, including among them the cosmological, ontological, teleological and moral arguments.

course, a fiction. However, as Poe reveals in a letter sent to George Bush, he embodied in it some thoughts which were original with him.[19] The fundamental ideas were identical with those expressed in letters sent to J. R. Lowell and T. H. Chivers in the same year.[20]

Here is the gist of the ideas. God is not spirit, but matter, or rather unparticled matter. And yet the matter of God is so analogous to spirit that the difference is just nominal. The unparticled matter, permeating and impelling all things, is God. The thought of God, which is the activity of the matter, creates. Man, and other thinking beings, are individualizations of the unparticled matter. "Death" is a painful metamorphosis. At death, the worm becomes the butterfly, which is still material that cannot be recognized by our organs. This being, freed from the shackles of the body, inhabits space, passing everywhere and doing everything by mere volition. This being or ghost is occasionally recognized by a man in mesmeric sleep. The importance now attached to the activity of volition stands in sharp contrast with the view of its being powerless in a future life as it was expressed in *The Colloquy of Monos and Una.* This is of special interest as a step towards the belief in *Eureka.* However, this interest of his in mesmerism, like one in phrenology, seems to have been of but short duration.

Another evidence of his untiring efforts for his peace of mind is to be found in his criticism of Macaulay. Commenting on the English writer's judgement that theology is not a progressive science, Poe advances his argument as follows. If the indications we derive from science, of the nature and designs of God, and thence, by inference, of man's destiny were proof direct, no advance in science would strengthen them. But as these indications are analogical, every step in human knowledge — for instance every astronomical discovery — throws additional light upon the problems of God and Immortality. "Indeed," Poe continues, "to our mind, the *only* irrefutable argument in support of the soul's immortality — or rather, the only conclusive proof of man's alternate dissolution and re-juvenescence *ad infinitum* — is to be found in analogies deduced from the modern established theory of the nebular cosmogony."[21] To this the following footnote was added: "This cosmogony *demonstrates* that all existing bodies in the universe are formed of nebular matter,

a rare ethereal medium pervading space — shows the modes and laws of formation — and proves that all things are in a perpetual state of progress — that nothing in nature is *perfected.*" The thought as expressed here apparently has one of its potent ancestors in Kant, who linked immortality with progress, as a necessary condition of character-building, though this moral idea was plainly not a deep concern of Poe's. In any event this assertion, dogmatic though it sounds, is, without doubt, a connecting link with *Eureka,* a prose poem offered "to the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities."[22]

By the time Poe composed *Eureka* he professed to have outgrown his reliance on the intellectual belief into faith in dealing with God, which is assumed as *spirit.* This was in contradiction with the notion of God as expressed in *The Mesmeric Revelation,* where He was considered to be *unparticled matter.* In *Eureka* this Being exists in the diffused Matter and Spirit of the Universe. All the creatures, both animate and inanimate, are regarded as infinite individualizations of God, individualized through the agency of Matter. As for man's existence Poe asserts, "Existence from all Time and to all Eternity — seems, up to the epoch of Manhood, a normal and unquestionable condition: *seems, because it is.*"[23] Although Poe does not elaborate on this point it is obviously an eternal cycle of birth and death, just as in the case of Universe one creation is followed by another return into Nothingness. A note inscribed by Poe on the half blank page at the end of a copy of the original edition of *Eureka* says that the pain of the consideration that we shall lose our individual identity "ceases at once when we further reflect that the process... is neither more nor less than that of the absorption by each individual intelligence, of all other intelligences (that is of the Universe) into its own."[24] Here is indeed a clear indication of his dogmatic and egotistic nature.

In spite of Poe's assertion to the contrary[25] it is obvious that the belief as expressed in *Eureka* is a form of pantheism with Plotinus as its remote, and German idealists as its immediate, ancestors. This belief was probably the only course left to a man of Poe's high religiosity and intellectual cast. And yet it remains an open question whether this brought him peace of mind, or for that matter, whether it could even dispel the haunting fear of the Conqueror Worm.

1 Lewis Mumford, *The Literary Review*, April, 1924, P. 642.

2 Allen Tate, *The Man of Letters in the Modern World* (Meridian Books), P. 349.

3 H. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (Doubleday Anchor Books), P. 65.

4 *The Works of E. A. Poe*, edited by John H. Ingram (A. & C. Black), Vol. III, P. 476. Hereafter this will be cited as *Works*.

5 Ibid. Vol. I, P. 148.

6 Ibid. Vol. II, P. 194.

7 Ibid. Vol. IV, P. 10.

8 Ibid. Vol. I, P. 117.

9 *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* edited by John Ostrom (Harvard University Press), Vol. I, P. 73. Hereafter this will be cited as *Letters*.

10 *Letters*, Vol. II, P. 438.

11 *Works*, Vol. III, *Pinakidia*, P. 495.

12 *Letters*, Vol. I, PP. 256, 257.

13 *Works*, Vol. I, P. 355.

14 Ibid. Vol. I, P. 389.

15 Ibid. Vol. I, P. 201.

16 Ibid. Vol. II, P. 204.

17 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Quoted from *The Speculative Philosophers* edited by S. Commins & R. N. Linscott, Random House), P. 541.

18 *Works*, Vol. I, P. 118.

19 *Letters*, Vol. I, P. 273.

20 Ibid. Vol. I, PP. 257, 260.

21 *Works*, Vol. IV, *Thomas Babington Macaulay*, P. 103.

22 Ibid. Vol. III, *Eureka*, P. 91.

23 Ibid. Vol. III, *Eureka*, P. 193.

24 S. H. Whitman, *Edgar Allan Poe and His Critics* (Rutgers University Press), P. 77.

25 *Letters*, Vol. II, P. 382.